

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS & BRIDGES,
ROARING FORK MOTOR NATURE TRAIL
Between Cherokee Orchard Road and U.S. Route 321
Gatlinburg Vicinity
Sevier County
Tennessee

HAER NO. TN-35-G

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

PHOTOGRAPHS

MEASURED AND INTERPRETIVE DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HAER NO. TN-35-G

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Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park,
Tennessee, between Cherokee Orchard Road
and U.S. Route 321

Date of Construction: ca. 1850 (improvement construction by
NPS in 1930s-60s)

Type of Structure: Roads, Bridges, and Landscapes

Use: National Park Transportation System

Engineer: U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and National
Park Service

Fabricator/Builder: Various private and public contractors

Owner: U.S. Department of the Interior,
National Park Service, Great Smoky
Mountains National Park

Significance: Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail is one
of the most narrow roads in Great Smoky
Mountains National Park. Living up to
its name, the road allows park visitors
to enjoy the beauty of the Smokies from
their vehicles. The transportation
system of Great Smoky Mountains National
Park is representative of NPS park road
design and landscape planning throughout
the country. Much of the construction
work was undertaken by the Civilian
Conservation Corps during the 1930s.

Project Information: Documentation was conducted during the
summer of 1996 under the co-sponsorship
of HABS/HAER, Great Smoky Mountains
National Park, the National Park Service
Roads and Parkway Program and funded
through the Federal Lands Highway

Program. Measured drawings were produced by Edward Lupyak, field supervisor, Matthew Regnier, Karen Young, and Dorota Sikora (ICOMOS intern, Poland). The historical reports were prepared by Cornelius Maher and Michael Kelleher. See also drawings and histories on related structures: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TN-35; Newfound Gap Road, TN-35-A; Clingmans Dome Road, TN-35-B; Little River Road, TN-35-C; Cades Cove and Laurel Creek Roads, TN-35-D; Foothills Parkway, TN-35-E; Cataloochee Valley Road, TN-35-F; Big Creek Road, TN-35-H; Northshore Road, TN-35-I; Cosby Park Road, TN-35-J; Deep Creek Road, TN-35-K; Greenbrier Road, TN-35-L; Heintooga Ridge and Balsam Mountain Roads, TN-35-M; Cataloochee Trail and Turnpike, TN-35-N; Rich Mountain Road, TN-35-O; Elkmont Road, TN-35-P; Loop Over Bridge, TN-35-Q; Smokemont Bridge, TN-35-R; Elkmont Vehicle Bridge, TN-35-S; and Luten Bridges, TN-35-T.

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Introduction

Before reaching Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, motorists enter Great Smoky Mountains National Park via Cherokee Orchard Road. This scenic two-way road begins at the park boundary with Gatlinburg and ascends slowly into the park for 2.5 miles. Passing a restored historic home, the road continues to the parking area for the popular trail to Rainbow Falls. From here, motorists can return to Gatlinburg via the Cherokee Orchard Trail or continue on to the one-way Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail.

Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail is probably the most narrow road in the park. With a posted speed limit of 10 miles-per-hour, this road winds through the forest, barely allowing the motorist to avoid the trees and rocks on the roadside. In fact, the motor nature trail lives up to its name and allows park visitors to experience the beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains from their cars. However, it is not possible to fully appreciate the natural world while looking through a windshield, and neither this, nor any other road in a national park, will ever be able to replace the solitude and sense of adventure found during a hike in the backcountry.

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At 0.4 mile and 1.1 miles on the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, roadside vistas offer views into the mountains. In order to maintain the views here, the Park Service cuts the trees along the roadside. Although some park visitors may disagree with the concept of cutting trees in a national park, the areas of the park through which roads travel are not considered pristine wilderness, and this cosmetic management of the landscape is considered acceptable.

The road crosses a stream via a small wood bridge at 1.5 miles. Several of these crossings are encountered on this road, and each is done with a rustic wood bridge which maintains the character of the area.

The parking area for the trail to Grotto Falls is located on the side of the road at 1.6 miles. Because of the popularity of this trail, which only requires a walk of 1.2 miles to the falls, cars are often spilling out of the parking lot and on to the side of the road.

At 2.4 miles, the present-day road follows the route of one of the old roads built in this area prior to the establishment of the park. Similar to the road through Cades Cove, the banks on

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the side of this road rise up from the roadbed, providing evidence of rutting due to years of use. Restored homesteads are located on the side of the road at 2.9 and 3.1 miles, and a mill is at 3.6 miles.

The motor nature trail enters the Roaring Fork Gorge at 4.5 miles and travels along the west bank of the stream. Rock walls rise up to the left of the road and fall down to the stream on the right side, presenting the motorist with a spectacular scene. At 4.8 miles, the road passes the dramatic "Place of a Thousand Drips," where a waterfall spills down the rock on the side of the road in thin rivulets. The beauty of this area is heightened by the moss and ferns growing on the rock. Unfortunately, the fact that the road passes right in front of the waterfall makes it difficult for a visitor to sit here and enjoy this sublime scene.

Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail ends at the park boundary with Gatlinburg, 5 miles after it began at Cherokee Orchard. Just 0.5 mile after leaving the park, motorists are assaulted by the sights and sounds of this garish tourist town.

Road Construction in Roaring Fork and Cherokee Orchard

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Settlers arriving in the Roaring Fork and Cherokee Orchard area in the mid-nineteenth century constructed a number of wagon roads in order to travel within their own community and down to Gatlinburg. As the community in this area grew, Sevier County built Cherokee Orchard Road over existing wagon roads in the period around the Civil War. Following the war, settlement here expanded past Cherokee Orchard to the upper valley of Roaring Fork, and residents constructed a number of wagon roads to connect their community with other settlers and Gatlinburg. Roaring Fork Road was but one of several of these rough roads, which could hardly accommodate travel by wagon. Over time, the residents of Roaring Fork improved the road by removing only the largest rocks in it. A lumber company operating in the mountains beyond this area improved Roaring Fork Road around 1900, and the county did further work in the period prior to 1934.¹

Similar to the situation in Cades Cove, the coming of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934, forced most of the people living in the Cherokee Orchard and Roaring Fork area to sell

¹ Inventory and Inspection Report, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, 1950; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

their homes and leave in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Others were granted lifetime leases to their property. As in Cades Cove, the Park Service removed most of the buildings in the Roaring Fork and Cherokee Orchard area, but left several in order to interpret the lives of these people for park visitors.

The first work on the Cherokee Orchard and Roaring Fork roads for the Park Service was undertaken by the CCC in the 1930s. In August 1933, the CCC began to improve the Cherokee Orchard Road by removing rocks, creating drainage features, and surfacing it with crushed rock.² The enrollees did the same for the Roaring Fork Road, and also improved the fords and constructed foot bridges along this road.³

After Great Smoky Mountains National Park was established, Cherokee Orchard Road was kept open to traffic, and led to an orchard which was leased by the park to several tenants, as well as a number of trailheads used by hikers. Roaring Fork Road was closed to traffic and maintained as a truck trail for

² Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1933; GSMNP.

³ Inventory and Inspection Report, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, 1950; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

administrative purposes. The road was also used by hikers and horseback riders, and was considered "one of the most popular horseback rides in the Smokies." In 1950, the Park Service considered the road to be "much more suited to this use than vehicular use," and desired "to retain the present atmosphere" of this rough road, which followed a tortuous route through the narrow gorge of Roaring Fork.⁴

Roaring Fork Road remained a primitive mountain road until 1963, when the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail was created by the construction of a segment of road to connect the Cherokee Orchard and Roaring Fork roads. The work was carried out under the Accelerated Public Works Program, a short lived federal program which put local people to work in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Sevier County, Tennessee, and Swain County, North Carolina were deemed eligible for the program, and each month, men from these counties were employed on various projects in the park.

In February 1963, these men began clearing vistas on the roads in the park, widening Cherokee Orchard Road, and

⁴ Ibid.

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constructing the link between this road and Roaring Fork Road.⁵
In April, three bridges on the new road section were completed,
and grading was underway on the entire loop.⁶ All bridges were
completed in May.⁷

By June 1963, the completed work on Roaring Fork Motor
Nature Trail project included widening Cherokee Orchard Road from
14' to 18' for 2 miles and adding 0.2 mile of parking, sloping
the banks and adding drainage to 1.2 miles of the 14' wide roads,
constructing 0.5 mile of 12' road and adding 0.38 mile of
parking, constructing 5.3 miles of 10' road with 0.54 mile of
parking, and constructing eight bridges from Cherokee Orchard to
the park boundary at Roaring Fork.⁸

The "Cherokee Orchard-Roaring Fork one-way loop road," which
was described by the park as an "automobile nature trail," was
opened to the public on October 9, 1963.⁹ The Accelerated Public

⁵ Superintendent's Monthly Report, February 1963; GSMNP.

⁶ Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1963; GSMNP.

⁷ Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1963; GSMNP.

⁸ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1963; GSMNP.

⁹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1963; GSMNP.

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Works Program continued working on vista clearing in the park
until the program ended in January 1964.¹⁰

¹⁰ Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1964; GSMNP.

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